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The tragic grotesque:
Dorothy Parker's women

by

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Dorothy Parker, who once called herself "a little Jewish girl trying to be cute," is perhaps best remembered for her remark, "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses" or as the person who responded to the news that Calvin Coolidge had died with, "How can they tell?" Sometimes, an anthology of modern fiction will include a Parker story to typify the witty sarcasm underlying nearly all of her writing. But too seldom are her stories examined as reflections of her disgust for the roles assigned to women during the 1920's and '30's, the years during which she did the bulk of her writing, both as author and critic.

What types of women does Parker characterize in her stories? Norris Yates, in The American Humorist, identifies the general type as "the self-absorbed female snob," a species which Yates says Parker knew best¹ "in its middle-class manifestations." Yates further classifies the female snob as "aggressive" (e.g., Mrs. Lanier of "The Custard Heart," Mrs. Matson of "Little Curtis"), "pathetic" (e.g., Mona of "Lady With a Lamp," the jilted girl of "A Telephone Call"), or as a combination of smugness and pathos (e.g., the girl of "Sentiment," the Weldons of "Too Bad") in which the female is victimized by others as well as being "largely self-victimized" by her attempts to affect a sophistication unnatural to her. Parker's aim in her stories dealing with the female snob, then, becomes social satire of the hypocrisy and hauteur characterizing "ladies" of the Twenties and Thirties.

Two varieties of the female snob discussed by Yates figure prominently in Dorothy Parker's short stories: the ingenue and the sophisticate,

types originally cited by Leonard Feinberg in his Introduction to Satire.² Feinberg defines the ingenue as "a naive, well-meaning person who travels through the world without understanding the hypocrisy, duplicity, and exploitation which [she] observes."³ Important to this definition of the ingenue is the satisfaction which the reader achieves from feeling superior to this character and from "evading the censor by inferring what the satirist's critical intention is."⁴ Because the ingenue so completely accepts the world as is and is blind to people's baser motives, the reader regards this figure with disdain.

Feinberg's second character type, the ironic sophisticate, "shares with [the reader] the detached, disillusioned view of a ludicrous spectacle."⁵ The reader laughs with the ironic observer rather than at her. Parker uses a variation of the ironic sophisticate in her short stories. This sophisticate does not function as an ironic commentator on the action; thus, the reader feels no sympathy for her. Parker's sophisticate, like her ingenue, is a figure for the reader's derision, and Parker's satire relies upon the reader's feeling of superiority to both types. Although both the ingenue and the sophisticate may appear as "aggressive" snobs, neither seems "pathetic" because both are presented as selfish and hypocritical.

The ingenue can be most precisely studied in Parker's "The Standard of Living" (1941), a comprehensive sketch of the rather vacuous career-girl whose foremost concern is with becoming both glamorous and wealthy.⁶ Unfortunately, the ingenue does not realize that her uncertain and sometimes over-eager attempts to sophisticate herself are viewed as humorous

by the already established glamour set. The reader, who may very well scorn the glamour set himself, scoffs at the ingenue and at the system to which this type pines to belong. In "The Standard of Living," Parker thoroughly mocks the life style and attitudes of the young working girl who fancies herself a glamorous beauty. Two ingenues, Annabel and Midge, are the focus of the tale.

The girls, their skin "like the petals of wood anemones" and their bellies "as flat" and flanks "as lean as those of Indian braves," dine on "sandwiches of spongy new white bread greased with butter and mayonnaise, thick wedges of cake lying wet beneath ice cream and whipped cream and melted chocolate gritty with nuts" as they play "The Game"--a fantasy in which an aged eccentric dies (peacefully, of course) and leaves one of the girls a million dollars because he had once seen her and had decided that "that girl ought to have lots of nice things." "The Game's" cardinal rule: "It is stated in the will that you must spend every nickel of the money on yourself." The reader cannot escape noticing the egocentricity essential to the girls' playing of "The Game." However, as the two stenographers are again lowered to the ordinary level of working people jostling each other on the street, "The Game" loses its fascination and can be re-vivified only by enlarging the fantasy, which Annabel and Midge do not hesitate to do:

"Listen, Annabel," Midge said. "Look. Suppose there was this terribly rich person, see? . . . And so this person dies, just like going to sleep, and leaves you ten million dollars. Now, what would be the first thing you'd do?" (p. 34)

Parker creates two very unsympathetic characters for the reader in

Annabel and Midge. Although one would ordinarily sympathize with young women working for pauper's wages, one cannot feel much pity for two girls who spend noon breaks pricing diamond necklaces and trying to out-regale each other with tales of what each would lavish upon herself if given this "cool million." The reader laughs at both the ingenues' vanity and at the value system which encourages them to cultivate this vanity.

But self-centeredness is not the sole property of the ingenue; the sophisticate, firmly entrenched in the middle-class value system, is no less guilty of egocentricity. Parker's story "The Custard Heart" (1939), epitomizes the sophisticated, unfeeling female snob in the character of Mrs. Lanier, a society matron "dedicated to wistfulness, as lesser artists to words and paint and marble."⁷ The special sorrow underlying this wistfulness is Mrs. Lanier's inability to bear a child. Mr. Lanier never enters the story, but Mrs. Lanier is consoled in her misery by "young men" who come to her drawing-room to "help her bear her life." The reader suspects that Mrs. Lanier's accumulation of young men and her wistful mask are much more important to her than her childless condition. Parker reinforces this belief by her portrayal of the society matron's conceit: she has no concern for anyone except herself, manipulating her "young men" and discarding them like so many dish-rags, and ignoring the plight of her pregnant and unmarried maid, Gwennie. Any reader trying to work out a resolution to Mrs. Lanier's dilemma would recognize the obvious---Mrs. Lanier should help Gwennie out of her predicament by taking the baby. But this denouement does not take into account Mrs. Lanier's self-absorption nor her seeming enjoyment of her martyr status.

She is so self-concerned that it is doubtful whether she is even aware of Gwennie's plight and, if she were aware of it, it is probable that Mrs. Lanier would prefer to continue "suffering" without a child because her self-concept seems to depend on the persona she has created for herself. At the story's end, Gwennie stands in the background, miserable in the early stages of her unwanted pregnancy, while Mrs. Lanier practices her wistful look on her dressing-room mirror:

Here was the perfection of her career, the sublimation of wistfulness; it was that look of grieved bewilderment that did it. Carefully, she kept it upon her face as she rose from the mirror, and with her lovely hands still shielding her heart, went down to the new young man. (p. 327)

Just as Mrs. Lanier extends no sympathy to Gwennie, the reader lavishes no sympathy upon the sophisticate. Mrs. Lanier is mockable, despicable, but not pitiable. Parker's satiric glimpse of the self-centered society matron sketches for the reader an outline of the empty values of the society in which Mrs. Lanier lives, values in large part responsible for the indifference which the lady shows to everything not directly associated with herself.

Yet, for all the sarcasm which Parker heaps upon the self-centered ingenue and sophisticate, her short stories do not always mock women characters. Sometimes the reader is moved to pity for a female--a certain type of female other than the ingenue or sophisticate, a female who appears to be victimized by both society's role expectations of what a woman should be (submissive wife and mother, bitch, seductress-goddess, old maid) and by her consciousness of an inability to fit into any of these archetypal categories. This type of woman suffers because she

cannot find a niche in society, as reflected in Parker's recurrent motif of the misfit's futile attempts to force others to recognize her as indeed "belonging." Critic Mark Van Doren views this type of female character as perhaps a greater achievement on Parker's part than the female snob:

Yet it is questioned whether she has not done something still more valuable in those pitiless tales which have for heroines women who through homeliness, advancing age, or the mere brutality of fortune have become both tragic and grotesque. The horse-faced nurse in "Horsie," the faded beauty of the stage in "Glory in the Daytime," and the perfectly harmless woman, punished beyond her deserts by calumniating Time, in "Big Blonde," are created at full length in colors so hard and true that their creator is to be accused neither of callousness nor of sentimentality as she worked. 8

Van Doren here seems to use pitiless not to imply that this type of female cannot be pitied but to assert that the reader should detest the value system in which each story is set, a system which will not cede any place within it to this woman. These "tragic and grotesque" figures provide the central focus in four of Parker's stories which I shall discuss in this study:

Mrs. Hazel Morse in "Big Blonde" (1929)
Miss Wilmarth in "Horsie" (1933)
Mrs. Allie Bain in "The Wonderful Old Gentleman" (1926)
Miss Mary Nicholl in "The Bolt Behind the Blue" (1941)

In each story, Parker contrasts aspects of the sophisticated female snob (either in the form of a secondary character or in the form of one side of the central figure's personality) with the "tragic and grotesque" primary character, showing that the central character's unhappiness results in part from her comparison of herself with this "alter-ego" of

the sophisticated lady. Van Doren's characterization of the "tragic and grotesque" female in Parker's stories provides the basis for my own adaptation of the term by which I shall refer to this self-victimized and socially unacceptable woman throughout this study: the "tragic grotesque."

Hazel Morse, Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde," indeed functions as a "tragic grotesque," tragic as she "falls apart because she has no dream of her own"⁹ and grotesque in physical appearance:

Hazel Morse was a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word "blonde" to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly. She prided herself upon her small feet and suffered for her vanity, boxing them in snub-toed, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size. The curious thing about her were her hands, strange terminations to the flabby, white arms splattered with pale tan spots--long, quivering hands with deep and convex nails. She should not have disfigured them with little jewels.¹⁰

Although she "has no dream" by the conclusion of Parker's story, Mrs. Morse once had a dream, one conceived against the background of social expectations for women of the 1920's. Hazel Morse wants to fit society's dictum of what a beautiful woman should be: someone small, protectable, and marriageable. But the "Big Blonde's" very appearance detracts from the image she tries to project. Hazel jams her feet into tiny shoes but her large, "quivering" hands give her away. In a sense, one could say that Hazel tries to stuff her whole enormous entity into the tiny "shoes" of her expected role; she wants so badly to be accepted that the hoped-for recognition is worth any cost to her. When she realizes that

she cannot project herself as someone dainty, someone to be protected by men, she takes another route to that all-important acceptance. She becomes a "good sport":

Men liked her, and she took it for granted that the liking of many men was a desirable thing. Popularity seemed to her to be worth all the work that had to be put into its achievement. Men liked you because you were fun, and when they liked you they took you out, and there you were. So, and successfully, she was fun. She was a good sport. Men liked a good sport. (p. 187)

Hazel plays this role even though it is not natural to her; it is simply a role which others expect her to assume, and she wants desperately not to disappoint their expectations. Along with becoming the "good sport," Hazel searches for security in numbers by working her way into a circle of friends similar to her, all of whom are "other substantially built blondes." This move insures that Hazel will not have to face competition from dainty, fragile beauties; she is on safe ground.

But, in the back of her mind, Hazel's dream of "catching her man" continues. The reader senses the "Big Blonde's" growing paranoia as she gets older and remains unmarried:

She was delighted at the idea of being a bride; coquetted with it, played upon it . . . She wanted to be married. She was nearing thirty now, and she did not take the years well. She spread and softened, and her darkening hair turned her to inept dabblings with peroxide. (p. 188)

Socialized to believe that marriage is any normal woman's ultimate goal, Hazel appears to be more in love with the idea of marriage than with the particular man whom she eventually does marry, Herbie Morse, "thin, attractive, with shifting lines about his shiny, brown eyes and a habit of fiercely biting at the skin around his fingernails" (p. 187-8).

But at least Hazel's fears of being an old maid, a misfit, are allayed by this marriage, and for the first time in many years she stops playing the "good sport" and allows her true personality to surface:

Wedded and relaxed, she poured her tears freely. To her who had laughed so much, crying was delicious. All sorrows became her sorrows; she was Tenderness. She would cry long and softly over newspaper accounts of kidnaped babies, deserted wives, unemployed men, strayed cats, heroic dogs. (p. 189)

Unfortunately for Hazel, Herbie discovers he does not like this woman who has turned from pleasing him by being a "good sport" to pleasing herself by personifying tenderness. Mr. Morse starts drinking and going out alone nights, while Hazel remains at home, lonely and puzzled at what she interprets as a change in Herbie, not in herself:

She was completely bewildered by what happened to their marriage. First, they were lovers; and then, it seemed without transition, they were enemies. She never understood it. (p. 190)

What Hazel cannot understand is that Herbie married the role-playing Hazel, not the actual Hazel. Only by returning to her previous role can Hazel please her husband, and she finds the joy of crying too "delicious" to surrender. Also, Parker implies that Hazel is so bound up in the dream of the happily married wife that she doesn't understand why her life doesn't parallel that fantasy. The "Big Blonde's" naiveté becomes evident: she is too eager to believe the fantasies of marriage which her society has instilled in her to realize the truth of her situation:

Somewhere in her head or her heart was the lazy, nebulous hope that things would change and she and Herbie settle suddenly into soothing married life. Here were her home, her furniture, her

husband, her station. She summoned no alternatives. (pp. 192-3)

Hazel feels she has played the game by the rules and she has won her prize--Herbie. Now she can resign from the game and enjoy herself. The reader sympathizes with Mrs. Morse's desire to "be herself," but yet is repelled by the fact that she sees "no alternatives" to her life, now that she is married. She pre-occupies herself with Herbie's presence, timing her days accordingly. Her loneliness when she is by herself is more than Hazel can bear, possibly because, when alone, she is forced to look at herself and to realize that she doesn't understand herself. This fear of being alone is yet one more factor in her willingness to play roles so that others will accept her:

In those days began the hatred of being alone that she was never to overcome. You could be by yourself when things were all right, but when you were blue you got the howling horrors. (p. 193)

But Herbie eventually forces Hazel to recognize alternatives by leaving her. Hazel then reverts to sublimating her own self to play the "good sport," hoping that because it worked for her once, it will work again. She gets into a poker-playing, boozing group of middle-aged women; takes on a series of paunchy lovers; and becomes somewhat of a fixture at Jimmy's, a meeting place for others like her--women characterized by Parker as bloated and grotesque:

They were all big women and stout, broad of shoulder and abundantly breasted, with faces thickly clothed in soft, high-colored flesh. They laughed loud and often, showing opaque and lusterless teeth like squares of crockery. There was about them the health of the big, yet a slight, unwholesome suggestion of stubborn preservation. (p. 198)

Dorothy Parker shows Hazel Morse's degradation over the years into a blowsy alcoholic, continually in a haze, not caring who enters her life nor who leaves it. At this point the reader really begins to pity the "Big Blonde," a "tragic grotesque" who cannot survive without adopting the persona of the "good sport." The reader's sympathy remains with Hazel, even when she decides to commit suicide. However, Parker's narration of Hazel's abortive suicide attempt is so riddled with satiric comment that, even in one's pity for Hazel's tragic situation, one recognizes the incongruity of the scene and Hazel's bizarre attitude toward self-destruction. After secluding herself in her bathroom with a bottle of Veronal, she begins nonchalantly popping the pills, raising her water glass to the bathroom mirror and murmuring, "Well, here's mud in your eye." The scene becomes more grotesque as Hazel prepares to lie down, remarking offhandedly, "Guess I'll go to bed. Gee, I'm nearly dead." Parker continues:

That struck her as comic, and she turned out the bathroom light and went in and laid herself down in her bed, chuckling softly all the time.

"Gee, I'm nearly dead," she quoted. "That's a hot one!" (p. 205)

The scene in which Mrs. Morse's maid discovers her also balances the tragic with the grotesque. Although the reader still empathizes with the pathetic loneliness and self-disgust which led to Hazel's attempted suicide, he also feels aversion toward the monstrous heap of woman lying

. . . on her back, one flabby, white arm flung up, the wrist against her forehead. . . The bed covers were pushed down, exposing a deep square of soft neck and a pink nightgown, its fabric worn uneven by many launderings; her great breasts, freed from their tight confiner,

sagged beneath her arm-pits. Now and then she made knotted, snoring sounds, and from the corner of her opened mouth to the blurred turn of her jaw ran a lane of crusted spittle. (p. 206)

Parker's final ironic touch to this story is the picture postcard of the Detroit Athletic Club which Hazel receives from her latest lover, a traveling salesman, while recovering from her suicide attempt:

Greeting and salutations. Hope you have lost that gloom. Cheer up and don't take any rubber nickels. See you on Thursday. (p. 209)

The "Big Blonde" had hoped to be long gone by Thursday, and the Veronal tablets had proved to be veritable "rubber nickels."

In "Big Blonde," then, Dorothy Parker sketches the archetypal "tragic grotesque," the female who is victimized by her own attempts to match others' expectations of what she should be and by other people's taking advantage of her willingness to be used. Both types of woman after which Hazel has tried to fashion her life are satirized: the tender, emotional little wife and the big-breasted "good sport." Hazel remains pitiable to the end, but she is also grotesque, both in her appearance and in her misguided efforts to belong to a society which will accept her only if she can "play the game."

Certain characteristics of Hazel Morse repeat themselves in another of Dorothy Parker's characters, Miss Wilmarth of "Horsie" (1933):

She was tall, pronounced of bone, and erect of carriage; it was somehow impossible to speculate upon her appearance undressed. Her long face was innocent, indeed ignorant, of cosmetics, and its color stayed steady. Confusion, heat, or haste caused her neck to flush crimson. Her mild hair was pinned with loops of nicked black wire into a narrow knot, practical to support her little cap, like a charlotte russe from a bakeshop.

She had big, trustworthy hands, scrubbed and dry, with nails cut short and so deeply cleansed with some small sharp instrument that the ends stood away from the spatulate fingertips.¹¹

Like the "Big Blonde," Nurse Wilmarth is big-boned with large hands, a combination which makes her an ungainly figure. However, physical comparison between the brassy blonde and the mousy brunette ends there. Miss Wilmarth gives one the impression of having been immersed in boiling water until everything about her is sterilized. She is perhaps best characterized by the adjective bland. Her "mild hair" is pinned tightly back into a "narrow knot;" her "big, trustworthy" hands are "scrubbed and dry" with closely filed fingernails. The nurse is the picture of orderly constraint.

But Miss Wilmarth's facial features are what really set her apart:

. . . her face was truly complete with that look of friendly melancholy peculiar to the gentle horse. It was not, of course, Miss Wilmarth's fault that she looked like a horse. Indeed, there was nowhere to attach any blame. But the resemblance remained. (p. 260)

This equine resemblance is most observable at times when the nurse opens boxes of flowers sent to her employer, Mrs. Camilla Cruger:

Once or twice Gerald [Mr. Cruger] saw a strange expression upon Miss Wilmarth's face . . . He could not quite classify it. Though he did not know it, it was the look she sometimes had when she opened the shiny white boxes and lifted the exquisite, scentless blossoms that were sent to Camilla. Anyway, whatever it was, it increased her equine appearance to such a point that he thought of proffering her an apple. (p. 263)

Parker creates her characterization of "Horsie" within the setting of the Cruger household. Miss Wilmarth, the nurse employed by the

Crugers shortly after the birth of their child, represents the plain-featured, unattractive but dependable American woman, called by Parker "sure and calm and tireless" (p. 260). Mrs. Cruger--Camilla--epitomizes everything in the American woman that is sweet, frail, dainty, and mesmerizing:

. . . she had always been pale as moonlight and had always worn a delicate disdain, as light as the lace that covered her breast . . . Motherhood had not brought perfection to Camilla's loveliness. She had had that before. (p. 265)

Camilla Cruger and Nurse Wilmarth are clearly opposing types. Whereas Camilla speaks with a "light, insolent drawl" (p. 269), Miss Wilmarth's words "fell from her lips clear and separate, sterile as if each had been freshly swabbed with boracic acid solution" (p. 269). Camilla's ivory-skinned beauty is in sharp contrast to the nurse's roughly scrubbed complexion. And, of course, Mrs. Cruger's petite, poised appearance is flashed at the reader against Miss Wilmarth's gawkiness. Camilla epitomizes the sophisticate and "Horsie" the "tragic grotesque" whom the reader pities because of Parker's relentless references to the nurse's equine appearance.

Two other characters complete the Cruger household: baby Diane Cruger and Gerald Cruger, the husband jealous of his newborn child for taking his wife's attention from him:

He would think, and with small pleasure, of the infant Diane, pink and undistinguished and angry, among the ruffles and choux of her bassinet. It was her doing that Camilla had stayed so long away from him in the odorous limbo of the hospital, her doing that Camilla lay all day upon her apricot satin chaise-lounge . . . It was because of her, indeed, that night upon night he must face Miss

Wilmarth and comb up conversation. All right,
 young Diane, there you are and nothing to do
 with it. (p. 263)

Both Mr. and Mrs. Cruger typify the self-absorbed, sophisticated snob. They are the "perfect" couple--he, the up-and-coming young businessman, and she, the beautiful and loving wife. Neither accepts any responsibility for baby Diane. Camilla hands the infant to Nurse Wilmarth, drawling "Good night, useless" (p. 266), and Gerald exhorts the baby with, "But you'll be an only child, young woman, that's what you'll be" (p. 263). Mr. Cruger, perhaps because much of the story is told from his perspective, seems particularly harsh toward his child. He makes no connection between his and Camilla's love and the baby's appearance. No love created this baby: the Crugers' love, like everything else about them, was perfect before Diane's appearance. The infant only throws a wrench into the works by demanding time which the Crugers could otherwise lavish upon each other. Gerald only once connects love with the creation of life--when "Horsie" mentions her mother:

Now Gerald had never thought of her having a
 mother. Then there must have been a father,
 too, some time. And Miss Wilmarth existed
 because two people once had loved and known.
 It was not a thought to dwell on. (p. 273)

This unfeeling attitude only reinforces the reader's distaste for the Crugers and for their self-centered life style.

Miss Wilmarth's attitude toward the Crugers is difficult to explain. She attempts to compensate for their virtual ignoring of their daughter by cuddling and baby-talking Diane much as if the baby were hers. Yet

Miss Wilmarth seems to revel in the Crugers' life style and is embarrassingly flattered when anyone pays any attention to her. "Horsie" becomes a tragic and pathetic figure because of her willingness to accept the Crugers' indifference toward her as a person and their recognition of her existence only as a servant, someone to be used. Miss Wilmarth's job as nurse is the only means she will ever have of being accepted by sophisticated society, and even that acceptance is shallow, based as it is upon her ability to perform like a nag pulling a cart. The Crugers make Miss Wilmarth a laughing stock by referring continually to her behind her back as "Horsie." But she remains naive and continues to idolize the Crugers even as she is leaving their home for the last time. Dorothy Parker infuses the nurse's final thoughts about the Crugers with dramatic irony. The perfect scene which "Horsie" imagines is actually one of shallow self-centeredness:

Their little pink baby would lie sleeping in its bed. They would be alone together; they would dine alone together by candlelight; they would be alone together in the night. Every morning and every evening Gerald would drop to his knees beside her [Camilla] to kiss her perfumed hand and call her sweet. Always she would be perfect, in scented chiffon and deep lace. (p. 275)

Miss Wilmarth attempts to take Camilla's place as mother and wife, trying to fulfill the role which the sophisticate is unwilling to touch. The nurse cares for the baby, has meals with Mr. Cruger, makes mistress-like conversation with Mary, the cook (who rebuffs "Horsie's" every attempt to be friendly). At one meal, to which Gerald has invited several male friends, Miss Wilmarth appears to be playing the role she

thinks Camilla would play:

There was champagne all through dinner. Miss Wilmarth watched Mary fill her glass, none too full. The wine looked gay and pretty. She looked about the table before she took the first sip. She remembered Camilla's voice and the men's laughter.

"Well," she cried. "Here's a health, everybody!" (p. 269)

Miss Wilmarth's attempt to vicariously live the role of wife and mother explains the strange look that comes over her face whenever Mrs. Cruger receives flowers--the look of a woman longing to be accepted in a role which, because of her grotesque physical appearance, she will probably never attain. On the day when "Horsie" is due to leave the Cruger household, Gerald, vastly relieved and exuberant at the thought of being alone with Camilla at last, stops at the flowershop for the daily bouquet of blooms he brings to Camilla and, as an afterthought, purchases Miss Wilmarth a small corsage of gardenias. With only this feeling of overwhelming relief backing his generosity, Cruger hands the nurse the small box of flowers, quickly turning from her to Camilla to observe his wife's usual detached reaction to his gift of flowers.

"Horsie," however, is thrilled by this insignificant gift and that same strange expression comes over her face:

Why, Mr. Cruger . . . For me, really? Why, really, Mr. Cruger . . . Oh, now, really, Mr. Cruger, why, I never in all my life-- Oh, now, you shouldn't have done it . . . Well, I never saw anything so lovely in all my life . . . Well, I just don't know how to begin to thank you. Why, I just--well, I just adore them. (p. 272)

She reacts as she thinks Camilla would react. But precisely because she

is still "Horsie" to the snobbish Crugers, they are revolted by her reaction:

Gerald made sounds designed to convey the intelligence that he was glad she liked them, that it was nothing, that she was welcome. Her squeaks of thanks made red rise back of his ears . . . Gerald was in sudden horror that she might bring her head down close to them and toss it back, crying "wuzza, wuzza, wuzza" at them the while. (p. 272)

Nurse Wilmarth seems more pathetic than ever in this farewell scene. Mr. Cruger's gift of flowers signifies to her that perhaps she is at last being accepted by the glamour set as a person rather than simply as an object hired to perform a service. But Parker makes certain that the reader realizes this is not the case. Gerald packs Miss Wilmarth, her face "like that of a weary mare" (p. 275) into a taxi, then rushes back inside the house to "get back to the fragrant room and the little yellow roses and Camilla" (p. 275). He seems unable to face the realities of life outside his narrow, seemingly perfect existence. Gerald Cruger depends upon his "perfect" Camilla to make his world operate. Camilla Cruger's detached attitude toward everything around her, including her husband and child, and Gerald Cruger's dog-like devotion to his wife are the objects of Dorothy Parker's ridicule. Miss Wilmarth, the weary nurse, is given sympathetic treatment, even in the final glimpse of her being driven away in a taxi, clutching those precious flowers:

The florist's box slipped against Miss Wilmarth's knee. She looked down at it. Then she took it on her lap, raised the lid a little and peeped at the waxy white bouquet. It would have been all fair then for a chance spectator; Miss Wilmarth's strange resemblance was not apparent, as she looked at her flowers. They were her flowers. A man had given them to her. She had

been given flowers. They might not fade
for days. And she could keep the box. (p. 275)

The flowers and their box are the only vestiges of the wife-and-mother fantasy which Miss Wilmarth can hold onto; she cradles that corsage almost as if it were a child. But the reader no longer dismisses her as the horse-faced nurse. Only in the egocentric world of the sophisticated Crugers has she been this. Now, she is clearly shown as a normal human being, thus increasing both the reader's pity for the nurse and disgust for the Crugers.

Dorothy Parker's "Horsie" portrays the "tragic grotesque" who can only vicariously live the roles she longs for. Miss Wilmarth is victimized by her own unfulfilled dreams as well as by the people whom she serves. There is no indication, as the nurse leaves the "perfect couple" behind, that the Crugers will ever think of her again. But Parker's readers, whose sympathy for the nurse has been growing throughout the story, will remember her and will blame the society to which she desperately tries to belong, rather than Miss Wilmarth, for her tragic and grotesque condition.

Dorothy Parker's "The Wonderful Old Gentleman" (1926), parallels "Horsie" as a study of the plain, dependable American woman versus the sophisticated snob.¹² In this story, the contrast is perhaps even more marked because the two principal characters are sisters, yet their blood-tie is the only bond between them. The death of the sisters' father functions as the surface plot, but the author's focus is clearly on the daughters' differing personalities and the different lots they have drawn in life because of them. One sister is smug, well-married and in

social control; the other allows herself to be dominated, has married poorly, and is a "tragic grotesque."

Parker initially establishes the pair's essential differences through contrasting descriptions of the women's attire. If indeed "clothes make the man" (or "woman"), the reader is immediately alerted to the opposing types which dowdy Mrs. Bain and sophisticated Mrs. Whittaker represent:

Mrs. Bain wore a rumpled white shirt-waist and the old blue skirt she saved for "around the kitchen." There had been time to change, after she had telephoned the doctor's verdict to her sister, but she had not been quite sure whether it was the thing to do. She had thought that Mrs. Whittaker might expect her to display a little distraught untidiness at a time like this; might even go in for it in a mild way herself. (p. 56)

Mrs. Whittaker's dress was always studiously suited to its occasion; thus, her bearing had always that calm that only the correctly attired may enjoy . . . She was dressed, in compliment to the occasion, in her black crepe de Chine, and she had left her lapis-lazuli pin, her olivine bracelet, and her topaz and amethyst rings at home in her bureau drawer, retaining only her lorgnette on its gold chain, in case there should be any reading to be done. (p. 55)

Mrs. Bain--Allie--is clearly the misfit struggling to gain acceptance by pleasing her socially conscious sister, hoping to second-guess Mrs. Whittaker concerning proper dress for the occasion of their father's death. Mrs. Whittaker--Hattie--has some seemingly innate knowledge of what to wear: tastefully selected basic black. One sister's dress reflects her emphasis on order and social correctness; the other's her concern to play the role of the distraught mourner. Each is concerned with presenting a particular mask to the other. Mrs. Whittaker's comment

that "Blood . . . will tell" (p. 56) proves ironic because the sisters' shared bloodlines reflect only differences between them.

Mrs. Bain's personal "distraught untidiness" spills over into Parker's description of the gauchly decorated Bain home:

If the Bains had striven for years, they could have been no more successful in making their living-room into a small but admirably complete museum of objects suggesting strain, discomfort, or the tomb. Yet they had never tried for the effect . . . The furniture was dark and cumbersome and subject to painful creakings--sudden, sharp creaks that seemed to be wrung from its brave silence only when it could bear no more. A close, earthy smell came from its dulled tapestry cushions, and try as Mrs. Bain might, furry gray dust accumulated in the crevices. (p. 52)

Allie Bain has tried to create order in her home, but has succeeded in producing only a grotesque representation of struggle and pain, mirroring what seems to be the state of her life. Images of martyrdom fill one living-room wall, a portrait of the Blessed Virgin parodying Mrs. Bain herself, with her "agonized eyes" and "great, bitter tears":

The opposite wall was devoted to the religious in art; a steel-engraving of the Crucifixion, lavish of ghastly detail; a sepia-print of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, the cords cutting deep into the arms writhing from the stake, arrows bristling in the thick, soft-looking body; a water-color of a "Mother of Sorrows," the agonized eyes raised to a cold heaven, great, bitter tears forever on the wan cheeks, paler for the grave-like draperies that wrapped the head. (p. 53)

As Parker's story progresses, the reader discovers that Mrs. Bain does play the role of martyr by letting her sister take advantage of her willingness to assume responsibility for their father.

Another factor contributing to Allie's insecurity and her attempts to gain acceptance is the fact that she "married badly." In a society where

a woman's status is dependent on that of her husband, Mrs. Bain, whose husband is the proverbial loser in business, has failed to achieve the social status of her sister, whose successful husband eventually has to provide Mr. Bain with a minor job at his brush works. The women's blood-ties mean very little to them as adults because they are married women whose identities are subsumed into those of their husbands. Thus, another bit of irony enters into the story: Mrs. Whittaker is more socially acceptable than Mrs. Bain not because of anything she has done on her own merit, but because she has been fortunate enough to have married a successful man.

In contrast to her self-conscious sister, Mrs. Whittaker is a self-assured schemer. It is she who decides that the children should care for their aged father and that the "Wonderful Old Gentleman" should live with the Bains:

Mrs. Whittaker always stopped things before they got to the stage where they didn't look right. So he [their father] had come to live with the Bains.
(p. 56)

It is Hattie who has just happened to learn the contents of her father's will:

. . . he'd gone and left all that old money to me. . . it seems he'd gotten some sort of idea into his head that Clint and I would be able to take care of it better than anybody else, and you know what Father was, once he made up that mind of his. You can just imagine how I felt. I couldn't say a thing. (p. 62)

And the reader knows it is no coincidence that Mrs. Whittaker has brought along to Allie's home her "lorgnette on its gold chain, in case there should be any reading to be done" (p. 55).

The sisters continue their role-playing, sipping cider and reminiscing about the "good old days" until the nurse enters to announce the "Wonderful Old Gentleman's" death. The sisters' reactions to this announcement reveal their continued role-playing: "Mrs. Bain instantly collapsed into passionate weeping" while "Mrs. Whittaker rose, set her cider-glass carefully on the table, shook out her handkerchief, and moved toward the door" (p. 64). Hattie, the sophisticated lady, keeps her composure. Allie continues to play-act in the manner she thinks her sister wants her to react; and Mrs. Whittaker, the nurse, and Mr. Bain reinforce this behavior: "Among them they got Mrs. Bain up the stairs" (p. 64).

Allie's desire to please her sister and to gain acceptance seems to pervert what might otherwise be her reaction to her father's death. It is, of course, possible that Mrs. Bain feels genuine grief; but it is also feasible that she is not entirely sorry to see her father die. Now she and her husband can entertain guests again, which they had refrained from doing while "The Wonderful Old Gentleman" lived with them because of his aversion toward any bit of noise. Mrs. Bain will no longer be tied to total responsibility for her father. But she is immersed in exemplifying the grief-stricken daughter, much more so than Mrs. Whittaker, even though Parker makes it clear that the father preferred Hattie to Allie: " 'That Hattie,' he used to tell Mrs. Bain, 'she's a fine woman' " (p. 58). Allie's search for acceptance extends to her father as well as to her sister; Mrs. Bain's "taking in" of the old man indicates her rationalization that perhaps he would come to favor her over Hattie if

only she would lavish enough attention upon him.

Allie Bain's essence is that of the "tragic grotesque"--she is victimized by both her frantic desire to be accepted by her family and by her sister's taking advantage of her willingness to shoulder the burden of their father's care. Yet Mrs. Bain is not so pitiable a "tragic grotesque" as Hazel Morse or Nurse Wilmarth because she seems to revel in self-mortification, a state perhaps heightened by her guilt feelings for having married a "loser." Mrs. Bain's affectation of martyrdom is as essential to her as was that wistful look to Mrs. Lanier of "The Custard Heart." One can understand the frantic, yet futile, attempts of a middle-aged woman to gain acceptance from her sister and father; but one cannot but feel a little revulsion for the dog-like role which Mrs. Bain assumes in order to get any little pat on the head.

It also seems impossible to sympathize with the coldly indifferent and haughty Hattie Whittaker, who keeps both her father and her sister at a distance so that only she can regulate any interaction among the three of them. Mrs. Whittaker's self-centeredness parallels that of those snobbish Crugers. Thus, the person who reads "The Wonderful Old Gentleman" discovers that Dorothy Parker displays contempt for both the sophisticated snob and for the self-styled martyr through her characterization of Hattie Whittaker and Allie Bain.

Parker's characterization of the "tragic grotesque" and the snobbish sophisticate takes yet another turn in "The Bolt Behind the Blue" (1941),¹³ in which two women once again function as primary characters. Miss Mary Nicholl, a "poor and plain" working woman (p. 394), has been befriended

by Mrs. Alicia Hazelton, who appears to be the "golden" version of the "brassy" Hazel Morse:

She was beautiful, modeled after the design of an earlier day, when there were not just good-looking women, there were great beauties . . . She was large and soft and golden. Though she was quite complacent about her massive shoulders and bosom, her real pride lay in her exquisite feet and ankles. (p. 395)

Whereas in "Big Blonde," Parker presents the large woman as the pitiable grotesque, in "The Bolt Behind the Blue," Mrs. Hazelton is portrayed as the buxom beauty.

In this story, the women envy one another, but in each case that envy grows from the woman's conception of herself as a martyr. Mrs. Hazelton condescendingly takes Miss Nicholl under her wing, allowing the spinster visits to her home, although these jaunts are kept at a minimum. Parker's summary of the sophisticated snob's attitude toward Miss Nicholl is that, while "to be the cause of envy is cozy to the ego," Mrs. Hazelton finds it "a boring business to go on and on feeling tenderness for one whose luck never changes" (p. 394). However boring Miss Nicholl's visits may be, Mrs. Hazelton continues to play the martyr, perhaps more out of guilt over her own decadent life style than out of genuine pity for the spinster:

The thought of Miss Nicholl always brought with it a nasty little guilt. She supposed she really ought to do more for the poor thing. But what more could she do? It was unthinkable that you could tuck a folded twenty-dollar bill into her dry palm. . . Perhaps she might let her come oftener, and she must remember to keep Mary Nicholl's name on the Christmas list. (p. 397)

Mary Nicholl, on the other hand, practically lives for those trips to the elegant home of the society matron, being careful never to over-extend her welcome:

She never did drop in. She always telephoned to inquire if she might come in for a little while the next day or the day after it, on her way from work. If she was told that Mrs. Hazelton would be out or occupied or ill, she let weeks go by before she tried again. Frequently there were long dry reaches between her visits. (p. 396)

Miss Nicholl fancies herself a martyr to her steady but boring secretarial job: "The job was permanent, and the lunches insured Miss Nicholl against constipation, yet it is to be admitted that her daily round lacked color and height" (p. 394). Her carefully planned and infrequent visits to Mrs. Hazelton's "long blue drawing room" (p. 394) provide an escape from her stagnant daily routine, yet Miss Nicholl prides herself upon her ability to hold a job and make her own way in a world where everyone (especially Mrs. Hazelton) seems more fortunate than she.

The two women use each other for their own purposes: Mrs. Hazelton utilizes Mary Nicholl's praise and adulation as a reinforcement for her purposeless life, and Miss Nicholl uses Alicia Hazelton as her link to the glamorous world to which she cannot actually belong.

As with Hattie Whittaker and Allie Bain, Parker establishes the opposing natures of Mrs. Hazelton and Miss Nicholl by contrasting their physical appearances. Alicia Hazelton, "with the folds of her chiffon tea gown flowing along her figure and her little Yorkshire terrier lying curled at her feet beside the tapering slippers that were made for her in Rome," resembles "an admirably composed canvas" (p. 397). Mary

Nicholl, like Nurse Wilmarth of "Horsie," typifies the sedate, colorless spinster:

Her features were less chiseled than hewn, and long lines ran beside her mouth and across her grainy brow. She was of a ruthless trimness. Her belt was cinched so tight that, looking at it, you could hardly draw your own breath, the stiff waves of her hair were netted to her skull, her skirt snapped sharply at her legs. She wore, to pin the collar of her blouse all shipshape, a pansy of lavender enamel with a minute diamond forming an unconvincing dewdrop on one petal. Mrs. Hazelton had never seen her without this ornament. Nor had anybody else.

(p. 398)

Everything about Mary Nicholl seems carefully confined: her "cinched" belt, the "stiff waves" of hair, her snapping skirt. Her "lavender enamel" pin is her one badge of identity, a tacky one at that, only heightening the contrast between Miss Nicholl's poverty and Mrs. Hazelton's controlled elegance.

The one striking commonality between the women is their loneliness. Mrs. Hazelton is lonely in the social whirl of the glamour set; Miss Nicholl is lonely in her little room with only one friend, Miss Christie, to confide in. Ironically, each is too self-concerned to recognize the other's isolation. True, Mrs. Hazelton does pity Miss Nicholl, but that pity is based on the spinster's poverty and on Mrs. Hazelton's guilt feelings toward her own too-comfortable life style, not on any detection of Mary Nicholl's loneliness. Miss Nicholl's visits to the sophisticate, meanwhile, are filled with a reverence for the lady as a true "woman of the world" whose life is replete with cast-off husbands and wealth:

She was not wealthy or well-to-do or comfortably off; in the popular phrase, Mrs. Hazelton was

loaded. To Miss Nicholl, whose experiences had not encompassed so much as a furtive pressure of the hand, there seemed to be always present behind Mrs. Hazelton's chair an invisible trio of the adoring and discarded. (p. 395)

One suspects that Miss Nicholl, inexperienced with sexual relationships, looks to Mrs. Hazelton as model and guide. The spinster seems to idolize Mrs. Hazelton's bratty daughter, Ewie, and at one point speaks of her own desire for a child, minus the sexual involvement:

If I could only have a sweet, happy little girl like Ewie, that's all I would ask . . . You don't know how I've always wanted to have a child all my own. Without having any old man mixed up in it. (p. 407)

In her yearning for a child, Miss Nicholl gives words to "Horsie's" unspoken desire, the only difference being that Miss Wilmarth would gladly have a man, too.

As the visit continues, Mrs. Hazelton shows Mary Nicholl a closetful of beautiful gowns and searches for some small gift to give Miss Nicholl, perhaps as a salve to the lady's conscience. Alicia Hazelton finally settles on a sequined evening-bag, "perfect to be carried with a ball gown" (p. 411), a present which Miss Nicholl realizes she will have no opportunity to use. Still, Parker says, "a present is a present, and Miss Nicholl positively writhed with gratitude" (p. 411). The visit ends as evening approaches, and Mary Nicholl walks out into a "vicious rain" after her final goodbye to her hostess: "And thanks again, a zillion, for the wonderful evening purse. I'll think of you every time I use it" (p. 412).

Suddenly, the reader is presented with Miss Nicholl's abrupt about-

face:

What kind of life is that, sitting around in a teagown, counting her pearls? Pearls that size are nothing but vulgar, anyway. Why should she have all those things? She's never done anything--couldn't even keep a husband. It's awful to think of that empty existence; nothing to do but have breakfast in bed and spend money on herself. No, sir, she can have her pearls and her hangers and her money and her twice-a-week florist, and welcome to them. I swear, I wouldn't change places with Alicia Hazelton for anything on earth! (p. 413)

The scene cuts to Mrs. Hazelton and her daughter in their plush living-room. Ewie is denigrating Miss Nicholl, and her mother comes to the spinster's defense with:

You're not to say a word against her, do you hear, Ewie? She's a wonderful woman . . . Why, she hasn't any responsibilities, and she has a job that gives her something to do every day, and a nice room, and a lot of books to read, and she and her friend do all sorts of things in the evenings. Oh, let me tell you, I'd be more than glad to change places with Mary Nicholl. (p. 415)

The tables have turned. Miss Nicholl's theatrical envy for Mrs. Hazelton has deteriorated into railings against the unjust Fate which has given the lady everything for doing nothing, while Miss Nicholl, who has worked so hard, is still on the bottom of the social heap. Mrs. Hazelton's patronizing pity for Mary Nicholl, "the poor thing" (p. 397), has metamorphosed into an envy for the woman who is not imprisoned by wealth and moronic servants. Parker crystallizes her disgust for both of these final outbursts by the presence of a thunderstorm, whose lightning bolt, which "though surely sufficiently provoked, stayed where it was, up there back of the blue" (p. 415).

The two women's martyr complexes lie back of their final attitudes toward each other. Miss Nicholl, frustrated by her inability to succeed in terms of status and wealth, has developed a "sour grapes" attitude toward Mrs. Hazelton and the social snobbery she represents. Alicia Hazelton's condescension toward Mary Nicholl has been replaced by a longing to be someone who actually does have to work to get ahead. Parker's refusal to strike either woman with that lightning bolt is the author's implicit statement that not even such a shock would awaken either woman to the realization that her role as martyr is a self-centered one.

In "The Bolt Behind the Blue," both primary characters are grotesque, one in her paucity, the other in her exaggerated plushness. But both seem mock-tragic rather than truly pitiable characters. Miss Nicholl wistfully assures the sophisticated lady that she would love to be part of that decadent life style from which Mrs. Hazelton wants to break away. Yet, the reader is faced with Mary Nicholl's final outpouring of disgust for this social milieu. Were this tirade absent from the story, the spinster might be viewed as the same type of "tragic grotesque" as Hazel Morse, Nurse Wilmarth, and Allie Bain--the woman victimized by her desire to belong as well as by others' use of her for their own selfish ends. However, Parker's inclusion of Miss Nicholl's final burst of angry frustration makes clear her intention to satirize Mary Nicholl as well as Alicia Hazelton. Miss Nicholl can be considered a "tragic grotesque" only in her inability to realize that the mask she presents to herself is as false as the mask she presents to Mrs. Hazelton. "The Bolt Behind the Blue" is one Parker story which leaves the reader with

little sympathy for either of the self-centered female characters.

What, then, has Dorothy Parker accomplished in her portrayal of the "tragic grotesque?" One major accomplishment is that she delineated a type of woman which existed during the 1920's and 1930's on many levels of American society. Just as Parker's mockable sophisticates and ingenues are drawn from life, so are her pitiable "tragic grotesques." They represent that type of American woman who is unable to "play the game" and fit into acceptable patterns of behavior for the American woman. But the essence of the tragic yet grotesque female figure is that she does not give up trying to follow the rules of the game. Hazel Morse, in the closing scene of "Big Blonde," has failed in her suicide attempt and faces two choices. Either she must try again to kill herself and thus escape her role of the "good sport" or she must continue playing that role in order to survive among people who expect only good-natured behavior from her. Nurse Wilmarth, we are given every indication, will go from the Cruger household to another similar setting in which she can continue to live vicariously the wife-and-mother role which, because of her appearance, she will quite probably never actually attain. Allie Bain will no doubt continue in her attempts to gain that nod of acceptance from her sister, even after their father's death, because she has for so long been conditioned to view herself as one who must ingratiate herself to Hattie Whittaker in order to get any attention. And Miss Mary Nicholl (unless she is someday struck down by that "Bolt Behind the Blue") will be able to convince herself that she is not truly

envious of Mrs. Hazelton only if she can maintain that "sour grapes" attitude of her final tirade against the sophisticated snob.

Dorothy Parker's second accomplishment in delineating the "tragic grotesque" is that this type has proved indigenous not only to the Twenties and Thirties but also to the contemporary American social scene. One sees the type in Sylvia Plath's characterization of Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar. Here, a young woman growing up in the Fifties is eventually driven mad by her inability to play the vacuous career-girl or the submissive wife-and-mother. The principal character in Alix Kates Shulman's Memories of An Ex-Prom Queen faces the same problems of trying, and failing, to fit role expectations. But there is one essential difference between the characters created by Plath and Shulman and the "tragic grotesques" of Dorothy Parker. Plath's and Shulman's characters reach a point where they will no longer "play the game" and where they openly rebel against American role expectations (or, perhaps, against a lack of what they see as meaningful role expectations) for females. Parker's "tragic grotesques" never overtly rebel and the reader is not given much ground to believe that the women even covertly rebel against role expectations which they are unable to meet. Parker's characterization of such types as the "tragic grotesque," the ingenue, and the sophisticated snob serves as one woman writer's satiric and tragic commentary on the status of women during the Twenties and Thirties. Her short stories, then, add to an historical perspective on women's roles during an era which offered fewer alternatives for the female misfit than are available today.

Finally, Dorothy Parker's short stories dealing with variations of the "tragic grotesque" establish her skill as both social critic and master of the short story form. The awarding of the 1929 O. Henry Prize to her story, "Big Blonde," suggests that she was being given serious consideration as a writer during the Twenties. But Parker's residual fame has come to rest on her sarcastic quips rather than on her social criticism or her short story technique. Some re-examination of Parker's short stories is in order, and perhaps this study will serve as the beginning of that re-examination.

Footnotes

- 1
Norris W. Yates, The American Humorist (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965), p. 266.
- 2
Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 239-40.
- 3
Ibid., p. 239.
- 4
Ibid., p. 239.
- 5
Ibid., p. 239.
- 6
Dorothy Parker, "The Standard of Living," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 29-34.
- 7
Dorothy Parker, "The Custard Heart," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 319-27.
- 8
Mark Van Doren, "Dorothy Parker," The English Journal, 23, No. 7 (September 1934), 542-3.
- 9
"Guinevere of the Round Table," Time, 89 (16 June 1967), 94.
- 10
Dorothy Parker, "Big Blonde," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 187-210.
- 11
Dorothy Parker, "Horsie," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 260-75.
- 12
Dorothy Parker, "The Wonderful Old Gentleman," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 52-64.
- 13
Dorothy Parker, "The Bolt Behind the Blue," The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 394-415.

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